1991

Assignment sequencing in professional communication courses: the search for an innovative pedagogy

Lynne R. McKnight Herr
Iowa State University

Assignment sequencing in professional communication courses: The search for an innovative pedagogy

by

Lynne R. McKnight Herr

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Department: English
Major: English (Business and Technical Communication)

Approved:

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1991

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

"As professors of Business Communication, we will err disastrously if we are seduced into 'researching' what can comfortably be counted instead of investigating the realities of successful (and unsuccessful) communication, [to quote I.A. Richards] 'Refinements in the Theory of Gravitation make no difference whatever to the way we throw stones.'"

Janet Kotler

Kotler's cry for practical dialogue, rather than an exchange of complicated theories, among business communication professors is a rare one. It is not that professors in the discipline don't crave such a thing; rather their peer juries don't believe it to be a respectable quest, one weighted with scholarly worth. Seldom do articles offering such practical advice appear in prestigious academic journals. If pedagogical practicality is included in these journals, the brief blurb (usually one paragraph) is usually confined to the last paragraph of the article, offering little chance for explanation of how to implement the theory discussed in the bulk of the article. Journals which do include pedagogical articles often consider the information less valuable to scholars than true "theoretical" articles, demonstrated by restricting the pedagogical articles to columns such as "The Scholar Who Helps Me Teach Better" or "My Favorite Assignment" (*The Bulletin for the Association of Business Communication*).

The primary reason for this phenomenon is not difficult to discover. In the battle between pedagogy and research, pedagogy takes a distant second place. In the struggle for academic respectability, business communication, a relatively new discipline still seeking an identity, cannot afford the luxury of breaking with the tradition of higher respectability for scientific research over pedagogical research. However, as an emerging scholar in this discipline who believes pedagogical research is at the least equal to theoretical research, I believe that with this thesis I can afford to break with tradition, and that breaking with tradition is not a luxury, but a necessity.

This break does not imply that theoretical research can be ignored. But unless theories can be translated into practical pedagogical advice for teachers, the theories themselves do not help us much in our attempt to teach students to "throw stones." Kotler suggests that scholarly research is indeed valuable to teachers, but:

> . . . after discussing Maxine Hairston's theory of paradigm shift that Thomas Kuhn discussed in *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* . . . What I want to know is how does Hairston *teach*? What happens at Carnegie Mellon on Tuesdays and Thursdays? And *then* what happens? And *then* what happens? If, instead of sharing codes and continuums and nine cell grids, we would tell each other what we do and why we do it, maybe we'd discover that we're as good as any dentist afterall (4).

To make strides in business communication, professors must be open to changes--changes in educational requirements for the professors of business communication, changes in core curricula, changes in course content and even changes in textbooks:

> The courses we need . . . are courses in what Elizabeth Tebeaux calls pragmatic writing--courses that emphasize common

> rhetorical principles but also analyze the applications of theory in specific discourse communities and test the adaptation of communication to varying audiences. Pragmatic writing courses are largely waiting to be designed, just as textbooks to teach them are largely waiting to be written. Such courses and texts will enable us to reclaim the rhetorical tradition for inclusion in undergraduate curricula (Matalene xi).

Embedded in the call for a new course design is a call for a justifiable assignment sequence, a justification which, for the current composition pedagogies, is weak or non-existent. This thesis is an attempt to design an innovative course in professional communication, including its sequence of assignments. A course in professional communication encompasses a majority of the content of both business communication courses and technical writing courses, due in part to the fading delineation between the content of the two courses. Although technical writing courses have traditionally been located within English departments and business communication courses have not, for the purposes of this thesis, theories of business communication will serve as the primary justification for the professional communication course. As this thesis will demonstrate, the professional communication course is based on common sense and practicality, yet has solid theoretical underpinnings.

Organization of This Thesis

First, this thesis will briefly discuss the historical progression of composition instruction, both in the area of general (primarily freshman) composition and business communication as well as assignment sequencing in each course. Following will be a discussion of current theories and pedagogical approaches which directly influence a communication course pedagogy which seeks to correct the inadequacies of traditional and even current professional communication course pedagogies as those inadequacies are perceived by this author. These contemporary theories and pedagogical approaches include the process/product debate, the inductive teaching method, network theory, collaboration, and the Targowski/Bowman Communication Model. An examination of assignment sequencing in terms of this historical perspective, as well as in terms of current theories, will demonstrate that the change in assignment sequencing does not lie at the individual assignment level, but at a higher unit level instead.

The third section of this thesis describes a course, which, supported by the theories and pedagogies discussed, is an innovative one. The basic premise for the course is the recognition of the failure of both past and current assignment sequences, and the assignments themselves, to make students aware of document conventions (versus prescriptions) as well as equip students with the knowledge they need to manipulate those conventions on the job.

Freshman Composition Course Design: A Brief Overview

In order to situate business communication in the field of composition studies today, it is important to understand the historical progress of the composition course in colleges and universities. By surveying papers presented at the annual MLA conferences during the period of 1880 to 1902, Donald Stewart suggests the shift away from composition pedagogy in English departments stemmed from composition taking a back seat to literature as a subject worthy of scholarly pursuit. The 1902 Conference, "Conflicting Ideals in Teaching Composition," asked MLA members whether teachers should focus on the art of writing clearly and correctly about ordinary matters, or the production of literature. As is evidenced in most English departments today, the literature votes won, and literature studies, snatching up what remnants of respect remained for the discipline, positioned itself as superior to composition studies. The Pedagogical and Phonetic Sections of the MLA were disbanded in 1903 (Stewart).

Composition studies, however, did not die out. The nineteenth century freshman composition pedagogy focused primarily on two general areas: prescriptive grammar, usage and style; and expository writing. Composition courses were given little respect in English departments and were generally taught by graduate students and junior faculty members. As composition courses gained acceptance, pedagogical practices began to evolve and improve. One of the major changes in composition from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries was the development of alternatives to the expository model (Bizzell and Herzberg 903-905).

When freshman composition courses originated late in the nineteenth century, students' writing assignments centered mostly around the four modes of discourse developed by Alexander Bain: narration, description, exposition and argumentation. Invention was rarely studied because it was believed that the careful study of science, as well as close observation of world events, provided all the subject matter students needed. Composition was designed to transmit knowledge, not create it.

As the course progressed, new models developed. No longer was freshman composition restricted to transmitting knowledge; a composition course was acknowledged as a means to create knowledge. Early in the twentieth century composition courses in some colleges used forms of personal writing--creative writing, reflective essays, and autobiography--as an alternative to the dominant model of expository writing. These alternate models continue to be used in composition courses today. Bizzell and Herzberg note that "Personal writing advocates drew some support from the new field of psychoanalysis--self expression seemed to be therapeutic, not merely self-indulgent--and, later, from the student-centered pedagogy associated with the Progressive movement in education during the 1920s and 1930s" (903). Personal writing is also used in current composition courses, most often as journal writing assignments.

The most recent writing models stem from the process movement, which is based on the actual process of writing, and includes prewriting, drafting and revision components which are closely tied to traditional rhetorical theory. The process movement is not an independent writing model that delineates assignments. Rather, the process movement provides heuristics for the components of the students' writing processes which are required to complete *any* writing assignment. Therefore, instructors who espouse the process movement use it for each assignment *within* an assignment sequence established by methods which will be discussed in the following section on assignment sequencing.

The changes in composition course design and writing models have most likely resulted from shifts in the requirements of student writers in courses outside of the English department. The process movement has been important in the area of writing across the curriculum because the process movement provides students with tools they can apply to writing assignments for all disciplines. Because education has become more and more specialized, innovative composition courses have evolved to meet the demands of that specialized education. Despite these improved course pedagogies, it is important to note that not all composition instructors adapt their courses to make use of current research. Based on the number of composition texts sold, "The Positivist or Current-Traditional group (which champions expository and personal writing) clearly dominates thinking about writing instruction today" (Berlin 769).

Another important point about the evolution of composition pedagogy is that composition studies branched into specialized areas such as business communication and technical writing to meet the demands of post-college writing tasks. While the goal of general composition courses is to prepare students for the writing rigors of their academic careers, the skills learned for academic discourse do not necessarily carry over to meet the demands of professional discourse. In order to supplement general composition courses, specialized courses in professional communication have been developed. Although these specialized courses do not replace instruction in general composition skills, they are important for the more specific writing and communication skills students will need to know on their jobs. Randall Knoper notes both general and specialized composition instruction are vital to an education that adequately prepares students for the tasks they face as students and future professionals:

> We may also cheat students by failing to teach other kinds of writing. If . . . English studies represent a kind (or rather, overlapping kinds) of writing, then teaching students that there is only one kind of writing worth learning, an efficiently instrumental writing fashioned for the professional transmission of information, a writing increasingly unlike our own writing is an acquiescence and a condescension (Donahue 138).

Assignment sequencing

As described in the preceding section, course content in freshman composition courses has varied since the course's inception. Because of the wide variance, it is impossible to suggest that a common assignment sequence exists. However, one basic premise common to nearly all freshman composition course pedagogies is that the course is developmental. In other words, most freshman composition pedagogies assume the students have not acquired the cognitive level of development necessary to complete complex writing tasks. Many courses are designed loosely around Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, which include in order of increasing difficulty: comprehension, interpretation, extrapolation, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation (Bloom).

If an instructor is attempting to teach a course in which writing assignments progress in difficulty through the semester, most likely that instructor uses one of two patterns: The first pattern involves a progression from using the self as the primary source to using external sources as the primary sources. A beginning assignment in this pattern might ask the student to write an autobiographical essay about a significant person in her life. The second pattern usually includes an assignment sequence which progresses in difficulty. In the second pattern, the papers assigned later in the semester are supposed to contain a higher level of difficulty for the students, i.e. the papers progress in length requirements, the mechanical correctness standard becomes more stringent, the topics become more abstract, etc. For example, early in the semester, a student might be assigned to write a three-page paper with a maximum of two errors per hundred words which requires research of at least two sources An assignment at the end of the semester might call for a student to write a 10-page paper which requires research of at least six sources and allows only one error per hundred words.

Business Communication Course Design: A Brief Overview

As noted, the necessity for the professional communication course stems from the limitations of the general (freshman) composition course. Woolever suggests:

> . . . a clear split between academic and nonacademic writing [exists]. And many of the undergraduates--the majority, in fact--take jobs where they must write daily in nonacademic fashion. Undergraduate writing instruction does these people a disservice if it disinherits nonacademic discourse from its rightful place as part of the discipline. The writing community needs to recognize the difference and provide as much

instruction in "writing for results" as it already does in writing to discover (Matalene 15).

Some educational critics who are fighting for the return of a "true" liberal arts education would take exception to elevating nonacademic writing to the level of academic writing on the grounds that nonacademic writing is somehow easier for students to grasp or that it requires less scholarly prowess. But most on-the-job workers would tend to disagree. It is important to note that Woolever does not suggest the substitution of nonacademic writing for academic writing. Rather, he suggests the importance of both courses in the education of a well-rounded student.

With the steadily gaining respectability professional communication courses are realizing, few (at least few*er*) scholars would argue against the necessity of the course. However, scholars in the fields of rhetoric and composition, which encompass the area of professional communication, are enmeshed in controversy as to the course content and focus. Scholars and people in business and industry alike often contest the validity of the topics and documents included in the professional communication course. For example, while the documents included in the content for most professional communication courses are somewhat standard (letters, memos, reports, proposals and resumes), Fleischauer suggests instructors teaching only the "typical" document forms are leading their students down the wrong path. "There seems to be a proliferation of writing courses for getting business *into* the house (sales letters, proposals and the such) but few, if any courses designed to guide day-to-day operation documents such as policy statements, procedures, instructions, investigatory reports and justification memos" (36).

But the root of the problem inherent with course content is demonstrated by the contradiction to Fleischauer stated by Hilda Murphy:

> When asked what communication problems they encountered in business organizations or what college business writing courses should teach, executives and business school graduates listed the following most often: clarity, conciseness, consideration for audience, organization, grammar, spelling and mechanics (85).

Clearly, the primary task at hand for instructors of professional communication is to strike a balance between the actual document types students are familiarized with and trained to produce, the fine points of mechanical correctness, and the manipulation of rhetorical variables, including organizational climate and consideration of audience, for the writer's advantage. All in the course of a sixteen week semester.

Many- instructors tend to pursue a balance for those pedagogical goals through a course content similar to the one Douglas presents in his 1978 handbook for business communication teachers. The first half of the course covers rhetorical variables and mechanics in week-long blocks in the following sequence: introduction to the course; communication theory and models of communication; semantics in business writing; analysis of purpose, audience and selection of content; patterns of organization; and sentence construction, diction, conciseness, jargon, readability and transitions. The second half of the course centers on the production of specific document types: application letter, resume, resume transmittal and letters (in order of difficulty: neutral messages, good news, bad news, persuasive messages). The course made extensive use of "how to" outlines for various document types that are either supplied by the text or the instructor.

Methods of assignments

The mention of "how to" outlines, also referred to as formulas or recipes, touches on a point fundamental to any course: the methods an instructor utilizes to provide students with assignments is fundamental to the instructor's pedagogy. The methods of assignments differ from assignment sequencing in that "methods" refers to what forms the assignments take and "sequencing" refers to the order in which the assignments are presented. Methods common to business communication courses include the formula approach, the case approach, and the real world approach.

Formula Approach The formula approach has drawn extensive controversy--even from scholars researching the topic more than half a century ago. Regarding a 1935 NCTE report, "An Experience Curriculum in English," James Murphy says, "The report came out against the mechanistic and formulaic methods of current-traditional approaches. [It also stressed] the importance of class relations and political contexts in teaching writing" (J. Murphy, 201). The suggestion that successful writing can be reduced to simple formulas angers many current scholars as well:

> For individual writers, composition pedagogies are 'productive' or 'counterproductive' in the world's most obvious senses, by encouraging or choking off the inclination to compose. . . Amidst the tangle of situations that constitute a classroom, some teaching methods will sometimes work with some students and others will

> not. No theory, in [Stanley] Fish's view, can reduce this condition to a formula (J. Murphy, 201).

Regardless of the ire-raising teaching "formulas" has produced, those formulas continue to be included in present-day texts (See Treece; Bovee and Thill; Ruch and Crawford) and Ted Atkinson suggests the inclusion of formulas in texts is one major reason for the lack of agreed upon pedagogies:

> [The complaints about freshman writing texts] presently seem to be in the process of transferral to business writing texts. These expensive texts are accused, and often rightly so, of rendering innumerable abuses to the English language and filling students' minds with hopelessly simple formulas and irrelevant lists. These formulas and lists are accused of facilitating simple-minded instruction and enabling students with moderate retention and talent to earn a 'B' and students with quantum retention and talent (the kind necessary to learn the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag) to earn an 'A' (3).

The acceptance of textbook models is but a symptom of the overriding problem with business communication pedagogy: an arbitrary, positivistic system has been imposed on a discipline which by nature craves, though necessarily lacks, exactness. Instructors and text-book writers have made attempts to wean themselves and their students from a formula-based pedagogy, although formulas are still found in many courses, albeit disguised. In most cases, instructors use the formulas as heuristics for solving communication tasks. One method instructors use to implement these formulas is the case problem method.

Case Approach With cases, instructors present the details of a communication situation to their students, and the students are expected to produce a good example of the document the case requires. A teacher might, for example, present the details of a situation where a consumer was unhappy with a pair of shoes he received from a catalog order. The case would call for the student to write a complaint letter to the manufacturer of the shoes. In some cases additional details about the case are supplied, i.e. your boss' sister owns the shoe company and you don't want to offend your boss, etc.

One problem with cases was mentioned earlier: often instructors continue to use the formulas within the case method. However this problem is not *inherent* with the case method. One problem which does seem to be inherent with the case method lies with the documents the cases require a student to produce. The problem with these cases, in my opinion, is that nearly all of the cases, open or closed, extensive or brief, tell the students what type of document they are to produce. Although varied responses to the same assignment are acceptable, the student can't produce a memo at the end of a case which asks her to write a letter, even if she decides a memo is a more appropriate vehicle for the communication. This type of assignment fails to supply students with skills for the necessary on-the-job task of choosing which type of document is appropriate for the situation. A weakness with cases, then, is that they are often too formulaic, or at the other extreme, too broad.

Marilyn Butler seems to believe cases are too formulaic. In her 1985 article, "A Reassessment of the Case Approach: Reinforcing Artifice in Business Communication," she criticizes the case approach to business communication, saying that what cases actually do, in spite of claims to the contrary is, "encourage students to avoid the real choices that writers face" (4). Butler attacks the artificiality of cases, and proposes that students should create their own cases based on personal experience in an organization or business. Butler's article drew passionate responses from many of her business communication colleagues in the "Controversy Corner" of a later issue of *The Bulletin*.

Stephen Bernhardt suggests that the cases Butler cites in her article were poorly written cases, and not representative of a majority of "good" cases out there. He says well-written cases can be found in Couture and Goldstein's *Cases for Technical and Professional Writing*, Little, Brown and Co. 1985. Two of Butler's arguments against cases that Bernhardt counters are 1) that cases are purposely ambiguous and 2) that in cases involving technical language, students merely copy that language and use it to create a formulaic document. Bernhardt argues that case ambiguity reflects the true ambiguity of real-life cases:

> The ambiguity some of us like to see in cases is not simply a result of vagueness or its converse, overspecification, as Butler suggests. A good case . . . allows for more than one predetermined interpretation of events. . . There *are* different ways of proceeding in the world, competing solutions to an exigency, alternative solutions which can be either defensible and productive or reprehensible and destructive (1).

On Butler's second point dealing with technical language, Bernhardt says technical language, too, is often a real-life necessity, and that forcing students to paraphrase passages that shouldn't be paraphrased is inexcusable. "Using established, formulaic language is essential in many communicative situations, and we should not advise students to paraphrase every bit of language they find in a case which is useful in their text" (1).

Real World Approach Another method of instruction involves students searching for an organization or business in the community willing to let them join the ranks and produce some documents for the group. Dan Dieterich and many professors like him feel the "real world" cannot be emphasized enough in the professional writing course; in fact, the real world cannot be duplicated with any case or assignment an instructor develops. Rather, Dieterich suggests that all assignments must come directly from the local business community or the university campus. Dieterich's course assignments typically deal with letters to the editor, complaint letters, thank you notes, and annotated bibliographies "on backpacking, recipes from foreign lands, small appliance repair and wedding etiquette" (5). These are fine assignments, yet one must wonder whether an entry level manager will be required to produce an annotated bibliography on *any* topic. And again, instructors are also tempted to use the formulas within the real world approach.

Assignment Sequencing

Considering the wide-ranging course methods discussed above, it is impossible to set forth an assignment sequence representative of all current business communication courses. However, as demonstrated with the discussion of Douglas' syllabus, some common factors do exist. First, for the most part, the more abstract communication components, i.e. rhetorical variables, are covered in the first part of the course; the second half of the course is then devoted to individual document types. Second, of the document types, the shorter ones (memos, letters) are usually covered before the longer ones (reports). Most likely this sequence is chosen because both students and instructors consider shorter documents easier to produce, although experienced communicators might contend shorter documents are sometimes the *most* difficult to produce. For example, a short memo intended to inform employees they must shorten their lunch breaks from one hour to 30 minutes might be very difficult to produce, considering the political context of the organization. Also, most professional communication textbooks follow the above described pattern--rhetorical variables first; document types, from shortest to longest, next. This arrangement is problematic primarily because length among various document forms is not always consistent. For example, a progress report is sometimes short, yet policy memos are sometimes quite long.

Another important consideration in assignment sequencing in a professional communication course is that the course is usually an upper level one; the course, unlike freshman composition, is not developmental--the course need not proceed from simpler to more complex cognitive processes. Rather, the primary goal for the course is to prepare students for the communication situations they will face on the job. Most current course pedagogies fail to do so, because, as discussed in this chapter, most methods of assignments and assignment sequences do not allow students to struggle with all of the issues involved in real world communication.

CHAPTER TWO

THEORIES INFLUENCING AN INNOVATIVE PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE PEDAGOGY

The preceding discussion of theories related to general composition and business communication pedagogies illustrates some of the reasons for the failings of many business communication courses. Following are discussions of more recent theories which provide insight into possible methods of correcting the inadequacies of these business communication courses.

Real World Necessity: The Process/Product Debate

Much of the pedagogical disagreement lies in the product vs. process arena. As discussed earlier, most business communication courses, and subsequently the textbooks designed for them, are traditionally organized around the product approach. For example, if a student, posing as a future employee, was required by an instructor who based his course strictly on the textbook models to write a letter rejecting a customer's damage claim, he would be taught, regardless of any communication variables unique to the particular situation, to follow the textbook format for a "bad news" letter. The product of the communication received the emphasis of the instruction, rather than the process involved in creating that product.

In "Process vs. Product in Freshman Composition and Business Communication Textbooks and in Our Teaching" Herta Murphy explores the product vs. process debate. Under the heading "Have Textbooks in Business Writing Virtually Ignored 'Processes'," Murphy examines eight business communication texts based on a study listing the most popular business writing texts in use at the time (hers conveniently number one on the list) for an answer to the question. Not surprisingly, hers being a product-oriented text, Murphy concludes process has not been ignored by current textbooks. We, instructors and students, have simply overlooked it. "Even if [instructors] use textbooks that critics say focus too much on products, well-chosen writing assignments require students to analyze, organize, and take other writing process steps before completing any written product" (86).

But a complete conversion from product to process pedagogy is not recommended for business communication courses by others respected in the discipline. In "The Process Religion and Business Communication" John Hagge argues that process should not be emphasized in business communication courses. After chronicling the past fifty years of business communication pedagogy, Hagge concludes that the process movement is not one business communication instructors should embrace. According to him, the process approach "suffers from several methodological defects, appears to be based on a number of mistakes about the nature of language and mind, and may lead to contentless courses full of solipsistic students" (89).

Woolever also supports Hagge's view that the process movement has overstepped its useful bounds. "[W]e have gone too far in applying the process method to all forms of writing, thereby imposing one set of standards on all writing instruction . . . the process method of writing instruction concentrates on cognition, while technical writing focuses on the next step: action" (Matalene 12-15).

James Murphy also believes the writing process is not worthy of constituting a pedagogy for an entire course:

> One conclusion should now be incontestable. The numerous recommendations of the 'process'-centered approaches to writing instruction are not very useful. Everyone teaches the process of writing, but everyone does not teach the *same* process. The test of one's competence as a composition instructor, it seems to me, resides in being able to recognize and justify the version of the process being taught, complete with all of its significance for the students (777).

The most logical place to find an innovative pedagogy lies somewhere between these two camps--product and process, keeping in mind the intended result of these courses: to prepare students to communicate effectively in whatever niche of the professional world they fall. To accomplish this task, instructors certainly cannot ignore the written products of communication, but at the same time must take care to teach students the process required for developing effective communication. "Our business communication courses should continue to include helpful, pertinent, up-to-date material and activities on both the composing process and the written product" (H. Murphy, 87).

Inductive Teaching Method

As discussed in Chapter One, the amount of emphasis an instructor chooses to devote to the writing process or the written product directly influences her teaching method. The traditional classroom is organized around the deductive method. The instructor presents the students with all of the "knowledge" of the course and the students simply digest that knowledge.

The inductive teaching method, conversely, requires the *students* to determine the knowledge they will receive from the course.

The inductive method has been around for quite some time, although it has not been widely accepted during the past century. Jane Tompkins, a current champion of inductive teaching, suggests teachers should remove themselves from the classroom in the sense that they are on a level equal to the student rather than an "all-knowing" authority. The students are then forced to learn for themselves through induction--examining all means available to them to discover a "solution" to their problem or assignment. Shirley Brice Heath suggests growth in literacy "does not require a tight, linear order of instruction that breaks down small subsets of skills into isolated, sequential hierarchies" (24). In addition, Berlin says scholars such as Jerome Bruner "emphasized the role of discovery in learning, arguing that students should use an inductive approach in order to discover on their own the structure of the discipline under consideration . . . approaches that enabled the student to go from creative guesses to verification in the more orthodox manner" (Berlin 208).

With an educational system which is primarily positivistic, most students and teachers alike would struggle within such an inductive system; however, an adaptation of the system might benefit both parties. Because the teacher and the student are, at least symbolically, at equal levels, both are free to learn in a way a positivistic system doesn't allow. Elaine Lees provides support for such a system, "One teaches someone the interpretive strategies of a community new to him, that is by, 'backing up' to interpretive procedures the teacher and learner share. Pedagogy thus becomes a double activity, involving both an act of individualism and an act of reconnection" (Matalene 147).

Network Theory

Closely connected to the inductive teaching method is network theory. Suggested as a "postmodern" pedagogy for the writing classroom which centers around a computer system, network theory primarily involves a reorganization of the classroom, both in physical structure and power structure. Barker and Kemp suggest "a postmodern pedagogy of writing should be enfranchising in nature . . . our pedagogy should be open, inclusive, nonhierarchical, consensus based, and process oriented" (5). However, Barker and Kemp point out that most current traditional writing pedagogies are not enfranchising. Rather, the current traditional pedagogies call for students to accept the information relayed by the instructor, and to learn that information well enough to successfully complete an objective exam or assignment, not to "internalize . . [the information] or transfer the information into productive behaviors" (7).

The process involved in changing the power structure of the classroom is heavily dependent on the physical structure of the room itself. Although replacing the proscenium classroom would seem to shift authority away from the instructor, Barker and Kemp claim this is not the case:

> [T]he instructor retains a considerable authority by virtue of her ultimate responsibility for curriculum and evaluation and classroom discipline, but her removal from the *position* of authority at the front and from the role of transactional

> switchboard greatly emphasizes the role of individual students as knowledge makers and empowered participants in the discourse of the community (16-17).

The primary and necessary vehicle for shifting classroom emphasis from instructor to students is a networked computer system. Networked systems and their software applications allow each student, as well as the instructor, an equal voice in the classroom. For example, some networked software applications allow students to comment on a topic assigned by the instructor or generated by the students in an anonymous, simultaneous discussion. To do so, the instructor might display a sample business letter on the overhead and ask each student to discuss the letter's approach to persuasion. Each student and the instructor, sitting before her own computer, types in her comments about the letter under a pseudonym and sends the comments, via the network, to everyone else in the classroom, resulting in a simultaneous, nonthreatening exchange of dialogue. The instructor is no longer solely responsible for directing the class discussion; the students and the instructor share that responsibility.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a natural extension of inductive teaching methods and network theory. Although many businesses rely on collaborative writing to produce commercial and in-house documents, professional communicators are just beginning to research and explore all the aspects of collaboration in order to understand and improve the collaborative writing process. Forman best states this problem by saying "group writing holds a significant place in organizational communication yet there is relatively little research on the topic" (49). Debs further states that this lack of research poses a major problem for understanding collaborative writing in the workplace: "There is no consensus . . . as to what collaborative writing consists of, or what separates a collaborative [writing] activity from a merely cooperative one, or under what conditions a series of interactions makes up a collaborative writing process" (35). In fact, academia needs to understand the increased frequency, effects, methods, and problems of collaborative writing in order to better prepare all students--not just future technical communication graduates--who are entering the business world, since most jobs currently available may involve collaborative writing.

Perhaps the increase of collaborative writing in business is due to the positive effects that researchers have found in the collaborative writing process. Some researchers believe that writing, like computers, has become more specialized, requiring groups of people--rather than one person--to produce effective documents. According to Stratton "the days of the single person handling all aspects of product development are long gone, as well" (178). He further states that "research supports the notion that collaborative writing is both more effective and more efficient than individual [writing] efforts" (181). Stratton also feels that the "greater the level of collaboration, the better [his] own writing has been accepted and the less it has required revision" (181).

Of course, as collaborative writing in the business world increases, instructors have implemented more collaborative writing projects in communication classes. However, theories and methods for the successful teaching or collaborative writing techniques are still investigated and debated (see, for example, Bruffee; Duin; Forman). Forman and Katsky address this shortage of teaching methods for collaborative writing: "The absence of formal instruction in group writing is particularly alarming because most business reports and significant shorter communications are either formally written in groups or are reviewed by key readers in a company before distribution" (23). They further suggest that instructors need to address both the small-group interactions and the writing process. Along with the development of collaborative teaching approaches, researchers are just beginning to investigate the effects of technology, especially computers, on the collaborative process (see Forman).

Because collaborative skills are important for students to become successful communicators on the job, it is important that instruction in collaborative techniques are included in the professional writing classroom. These collaborative skills might include group writing projects, group problem solving and group presentations.

Targowski/Bowman Communication Model

Although most communication models seem to offer little practical, pedagogical application, components of Targowski and Bowman's communication model (1990) offer perhaps the most important recent insight to teachers of professional writing who are dissatisfied with the accepted current course designs. Although the Targowski/Bowman schema is three-faceted, the second facet, in which they demonstrate a hierarchy of 10 "links" which affect communication, is of special importance for professional communication instructors. (For a graphic representation of the model, see Appendix A).

According to Targowski and Bowman, "These links are hierarchical, from the purely physical to the purely mental." This statement suggests that the physical links which include the physical link, systems link, audience link, session link, environmental link, and functions and role link, at the low end of the hierarchy are easier for communicators to grasp and influence than the mental links, including the symbols link, behavior link, value link, and storage/retrieval link, at the top of the scale. If the links are truly hierarchical in this fashion, it would be logical to design a professional communication course which progresses through these variables in the suggested hierarchical order. For example, students would first learn about various document forms, i.e. letters, memos, reports, etc., then later in the semester tackle the more difficult (mental) variables such as the influence of organizational climate on the communication.

The Targowski/Bowman model has drawn some criticism since its origination. In his critique of the model, van Hoorde disagrees with some of Targowski and Bowman's labeling and content inclusion for some links, but he seems to agree that the communication variables are in a hierarchical order, and that this hierarchy is valuable:

> The isolation of the various variables, responsible for reflecting information and their presentation in a unified hierarchical structure, helps us to understand why communication is an imperfect system. In other words, the model's explanatory power

> exceeds by far that of previous models, especially its increased capacity to 'predict' what can go wrong on each level (55).

Some confusion arises when, in response to van Hoorde's critique, Bowman says, "I continue to think that the mental links work in a coordinated way rather than in a strict hierarchical fashion with Storage Retrieval having a dominance" (72). By this comment, it would seem that the hierarchy only places the entire *group* of mental links above the *group* of physical links, rather than ranking the links individually in the hierarchy. Although this interpretation doesn't preclude designing a course around the link hierarchy, it does make the hierarchy less precise.

This lack of precision, however, is not a problem. Even with the two-part hierarchy Targowski and Bowman present, the idea is a complete reversal of the current basic course sequence. As discussed previously in this paper, most instructors first teach rhetorical variables and other "more complex" communication variables, then later teach document types. This model suggests a complete reversal of the course sections is in order.

Summary

While not all of the theories discussed above are new theories in the sense that the theories were recently postulated, I believe the combination of the theories is a novel one. By drawing on the fundamental research in the areas of basic composition and business communication discussed in Chapter One, and the more recent research discussed in Chapter Two, the direction for an innovative professional communication course is charted and will be discussed in Chapter Three.

CHAPTER THREE

RATIONALE FOR THE PROPOSED PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

Course Description

Professional Communication is targeted at students pursuing professional degrees which will require written and oral communication skills in addition to the communication skills required by their degree programs. Most students will be from the departments of business, agriculture, and engineering, although some may come from other departments as well. Designed for students who have achieved at least sophomore standing, the course assumes students have successfully completed two semesters of freshman composition, or have developed minimal written communication proficiency.

In order to make full use of network theory, the course ideally would be taught in a networked computer lab. While it is not necessary that all instruction take place in the lab, I believe students who study in the computer lab will learn the material in the course more thoroughly and more enjoyably. In addition, the practical experience with the computers should be beneficial for most any professional positions on which the students have their sights.

Course Objectives

- To help students understand and apply communication theories throughout the production of professional documents
- To help students become aware of the organization as a context for writing and of the situational nature of professional communication, with emphasis

on corporate culture, intercultural communication and the political considerations of communicating on the behalf of the organization.

- To engage students in the collaborative process common to writing in the workplace
- To assist students in understanding options for formatting, organization, style, document type, etc. in responding to various rhetorical situations in professional communication
- To encourage students to become familiar with the written, oral and visual conventions governing professional communication
- To make students aware of the ethical and legal implications of written and oral communication in the workplace

Textbooks

My goal for the course is to develop my own textbook of photocopied examples of various document types, as well as informational articles about current topics in communication. As a supplement to the photocopied text, I would like to keep at least two copies of the about ten different published textbooks for the course on reserve at the library for students to use as a reference. Students would develop their own handbooks by creating the document reference sheets and collecting their own sample documents.

Course Rationale

By discussing the pedagogy of professional communication courses with instructors who are teaching the course, and by performing an extensive search of current literature on the subject, I have found no course similar to the one I propose. By accepting Targowski and Bowman's idea that product-based variables are easier to grasp than rhetorical variables; and that students should leave the classroom with the tools necessary to prepare them for the communication demands of the workplace, I propose the following professional communication course.

The course is essentially divided into two units, the first occurring in approximately the first eight weeks of a sixteen week semester and the second occurring in the second eight weeks. Although the idea is a new one, it should not be too complex for a beginning teacher.

Unit one (first half of the course)

The first half of the course would be devoted primarily to familiarizing students with the document forms available to them as business communicators. In a general professional writing course, the documents covered would most likely include: memos, letters, reports, resumes, proposals and job application letters. Since the goal for the first unit is to familiarize students with these documents, no rhetorical variables would be discussed formally during this unit. Rather, students would be assigned to complete the following tasks for each of the document forms previously mentioned: to complete a reference sheet for each document, and bring two "real-life" examples of each document form to be discussed in class.

Reference sheets The reference sheet is a vital component of the course. (A completed reference sheet is included in Appendix B.) For each document form examined, the student will be required to identify the following information:

- What is the document type?
- What are the typical messages this document type usually conveys?

- Is there a typical length for this document type? a minimum or maximum length?
- Is this document type usually used for in-house or out-of-house communication?
- What are the formatting conventions for this document type--blocked? salutation? complimentary close?, etc.
- Will the document be read by multiple audiences? Who are the most likely audiences?
- Is this document type usually combined with any other document types?

Unit two (second half of the course)

In the second unit of the course, students will be required to put to use the knowledge about document forms which they gained in unit one. All class and lecture time will be devoted to the discussion of rhetorical principles and communication variables involved in situations where production of documents is required. Students will be required to create various documents in response to cases. The difference in these cases from typical cases is that the student is left to determine the appropriate document form to convey the message, as well as to make rhetorical choices which govern the document type they choose to communicate their message.

Job search case For this case, students will be divided into groups of three or four students, in order to stress the importance of collaboration. Each group will be required to produce the documents requested in an advertisement for a professional position in which each person in the group is interested. For example, Group A may decide to answer an advertisement from the *Des Moines Register* requesting applications for the position of entry-level insurance claims adjustor. It is important to note that although the class as a whole may be responding to different advertisements, all members of each student group must agree to respond to the same advertisement. Most likely the advertisements will request an application letter and resume, although some may require filling out an application form. Although the requirements may vary, students must be required to produce whatever documents the advertisement requests. To assist in producing these documents, students will use the reference sheets they created in the first half of the course.

Each person in the group will bring her individual documents to class and exchange documents with a member of another group. Each group will then be required to choose (by group consensus) one applicant from the group they are evaluating for the job. After doing this, each member of the group must produce a document notifying each applicant of the outcome and actually give the letters to the applicants. Following the activity, the groups will discuss the feelings produced by the various documents, their effectiveness or ineffectiveness and methods for improvement.

Because ethics is an important part of education for future employees of business and industry, an ethical dilemma will be added to each case. For the job search case, the students will explore the possibility that they are working in a position where they are to hire a person to work under them. The problem is that their supervisor already has someone in mind for the job and wants the employee to give the job to that person. Because the students' employer is officially an equal opportunity, affirmative action employer, the students advertise for the position and receive 75 applicants, but give the job to the boss' pick in the end. How will the students respond when one of the applicants with experience directly matching the job qualifications, as well an excellent work record, calls to find out why she wasn't granted an interview? What are the legal implications of this case?

Sequence of Writing Assignments

As I have discussed throughout this paper, I believe the important component of assignment sequencing is not the sequencing of the individual assignments, but rather the sequence of the larger sections, or units of a course. I plan to sequence the individual document types primarily according to my perception of the students' familiarity with the various document types. Most students, for example, are familiar with letters, so we would discuss letters and prepare the reference sheets for letters early in the first half of the course, mainly to ease student anxiety. Another option, in line with the student empowerment theory, is to have the students decide which order to discuss the document types.

Ideally, the series of cases in the second half of the course will require students to produce all of the document types discussed in the first half of the course. However, because the documents the cases require will not be prescribed, there is no guarantee each student will actually produce an example of each document type. But by providing students with a bank of knowledge about options for document forms in the beginning of the semester, the possibility for the student to become familiar with only one document type is avoided. For example, even though a student might decide that every case in the second half of the semester calls for him to produce a two-page memo, he will still at least be familiar with the other choices available to him. And besides that, he should become quite proficient at producing memos--a level of proficiency difficult to obtain with only the one or two weeks of instruction devoted to each document type in the traditional course.

Grading System

Because this course grants students considerably more responsibility for their learning than in most traditional professional communication courses, the teacher's role as grade assigner becomes rather tenuous. After all, if students shoulder much of the responsibility for discovering their own knowledge, it would seem unjust not to also grant some of the grading responsibility to the students. One method for balancing grading responsibility between the students and the instructor might be to have two grades assigned to each of the cases for each student, one by the instructor and one by peer groups. Another consideration for evaluating students lies in the students' acquired ability to make effective choices of document forms as well as manipulate rhetorical variables and language conventions. Students should also become versed in the vocabulary specific to professional communication and develop a professional manner.

As this grading system suggests, decentering the classroom and placing more responsibility for learning with the students is not problem-free. A teacher who attempts a course based on the principles set forth in this thesis must recognize that she also loses some of the power over the students a traditional classroom arrangement supplies. However, with flexibility and effort, I believe a course like the one proposed will benefit both the students and the instructor because this course design will free both students and teachers to get down to the business of learning.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This thesis has suggested a course which is innovative in light of the history of both general composition and professional communication courses. Traditionally, business communication courses have failed to recognize the need to prepare students to make the communication choices necessary once they leave the classroom and are required to make those decisions on their own. By examining the process/product debate, collaboration, network theory, inductive teaching methods and the Targowski/Bowman Communication Model, we can fill some of the gaps which currently exist between professional communication *courses* and professional communication *requirements*.

WORKS CONSULTED

Atkinson, Ted. "Process and Product in Business Writing: Low Faculty Morale and New Challenges." Paper presented at the Eastern Regional Conference of the American Business Communication Association, Philadelphia, PA, April 21-23, 1983. ERIC ED 232214.

Barker, Thomas T. and Fred O. Kemp. "Network Theory: A Postmodern Pedagogy for the Writing Classroom." *Computers and Community.* Portsmouth: Boyton Cook, 1990: 1-27.

Berlin, James A. "Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories." *College English* 44.8 (1982): 765-777.

Bizzell, Patricia and Bruce Herzberg. *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present.* Boston: Bedford, 1990.

Bloom, Benjamin S., ed. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain.* New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1956.

Bloomfield, Caroline L. and Irene R. Fairley. *Business Communication: A Process Approach.* San Diego: Harocourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.

Bovee, Courtland L. and John V. Thill. *Business Communication Today.* 2nd ed. New York: Random House, 1986.

Broadhead, Glenn J., et al. *The Variables of Composition: Process and Product in a Business Setting.* Southern Illinois, UP, 1986.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind.'" *College English* 46.7 (1984): 635-652.

Bunce, Chris. "Corporate Rookies Need Cultural Awareness." *Iowa State Daily* 18 Apr. 1991, 2.

Christian, Rod. "My Favorite Assignment: And Editing Process that Works." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 50.3 (1987): 27-28.

Cullinan, Mary. "Developing Business Writing Skills Through Group Activity." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication.* 50.3 (1987): 21-23.

Debs, Mary Beth. "Collaborative Writing in Industry." *Technical Writing: Theory and Practice*, Ed. Bertie E. Fearing and W. Keats Sparrow. New York: MLA, 1979. 33-42.

Dieterich, Dan. "Real Readers for Real Writers." Paper presented at the Conference of College Composition and Communication, Minneapolis, MN, March 21-23, 1985. ERIC ED 258234.

Donahue, Patricia and Ellen Quandahl, eds. *Reclaiming Pedagogy: The Rhetoric of the Classroom.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1989.

Douglas, George H., ed. *The Teaching of Business Communication.* Champaign: American Business Communication Association, 1978.

Douglas, George H. and Herbert H. Hildebrandt, eds. *Studies in the History of Business Writing.* Urbana: The Association for Business Communication, 1985.

Duin, Ann Hill. "Computer-Supported Collaborative Writing: The Workplace and the Writing Classroom." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* Apr. 1991: 123-150.

Ede, Lisa S. and Andrea A. Lunsford. "Collaboration in Writing on the Job: A Research Report." Conference of College Composition and Communication. New Orleans, 13-15 March 1986.

Ede, Lisa S. and Andrea A. Lunsford. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors.: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Ewald, Helen Rothschild . "The Me in You-attitude: Business Communication as Transaction." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 48.1 (1985): 7-11.

Ewald, Helen Rothschild and Donna Stine. "Speech Act Theory and Business Communication Conventions." *Journal of Business Communication* 20.3 (1983): 13-25.

Faigley, Lester. "Subverting the Electronic Workbook: Teaching Writing Using Networked Computers." The Writing Teacher as Researcher, ed. Donald A. Daiker and Max W. Morenberg. Portsmouth: Boyton Cook, 190: 290-311.

Fleischauer, F.W. "Meeting the Writing Needs of Business And Industry." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 45.4 (1982): 36-41.

Flores, Mary J. "Computer Conferencing: Composing a Feminist Community of Writers." *Computers and Community*. Portsmouth: Boyton/Cook, 1990: 106-117.

Forman, Janis and Patricia Katsky. "The Group Report: A Problem in Small Group or Writing Processes?" *Journal of Business Communication* 23.4 (1986): 23-35.

Forman, Janis. "Novices Work on Group Reports: Problems in Group Writing and in Computer-Supported Group Writing." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* Jan. 1991: 48-75.

Fulwiler, Toby, and Art Young, eds. *Programs That Work: Models and Methods for Writing Across the Curriculum.* Portsmouth: Boyton/Cook, 1990.

Griffen, C.W. "My Favorite Assignment: Headfirst: Two Introductory Assignments." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 50.4 (1987): 17-18.

Hagge, John. "The Process Religion and Business Communication." *The Journal of Business Communication* 24.1 (1987): 89-120.

Halpren, Jeanne W., ed. *Teaching Business Writing: Approaches, Plans, Pedagogy, Research.* West Lafayette: Copymat Services, Inc, 1983.

Herbert, Mellanie and Mary Margaret Hosler. "My Favorite Assignment: Improve Business Writing Skills with Reactive Writing. *The Bulletin of the Association of Business Communication* 47.1 (1984): 25-28.

Hull, Debra L. *Business and Technical Communication: A Bibliography, 1975-1985.* Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1987.

Johnson, Jack E. "Communications Exchange: A Motivational Activity." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 45.4 (1982): 29-30.

Kettering, Ronald. "Meeting the Needs of the Accounting Profession: Requiring More Student Writing." *Journal of Education for Business* ?? (1989): 64-66.

Kotler, Janet. "The Scholar Who Helps Me Teach Better: On I.A. Richards--And Some Other Things." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 48.1 (1985): 2-4.

Lay, Mary M. "Interpersonal Conflict in Collaborative Writing: What We Can Learn from Gender Studies." *Journal of Business and Technical Communication* 3.2 (1989): 5-28.

Matalene, Carolyn B., ed. *Worlds of Writing: Teaching and Learning in Discourse Communities at Work*. New York: Random House, 1989.

Murphy, Herta. "Process vs. Product in Freshman Composition and Business Communication Textbooks and in Our Teaching." *The Journal of Business Communication* 24.1 (1987): 79-88.

Murphy, James J. *A Short History of Writing Instruction: From Ancient Greece to Twentieth-Century America*. Hermagoras, 1990.

Nelson, Charles. "Emphasizing Professionalism: An Assignment in Business Writing." Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the International Communications Conference, St. Louis, MO, May 104, 1983. ERIC ED 259399.

Nelson, Jennie. "This was an Easy Assignment: Examining How Students Interpret Academic Writing Tasks." *Research in the Teaching of English* 24.4 (1990): 362-396.

Post, Robert E. and Jack E. Johnson. "My Favorite Assignment: Applying George Orwell's 'Politics and the English Language' to Business Writing." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 45.4 (1982): 26-28.

Renshaw, Debbie A. "A Comparison of the Effectiveness of Two Written In-Class Assignments in Collegiate Level Business Communication." *The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal* 30.3 (1988): 120-130.

"Replies to Marilyn S. Butler's Article 'A Reassessment of the Case Approach: 'Reinforcing Artifice in Business Writing Courses.'" *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 49.2 (1986): 1-7.

Ruch, William V. and Maurice L. Crawford. *Business Communication.* New York: Macmillan, 1991.

Scheiber, H.J. "Conscious Raising and Collaboration: The One-Day Professional Seminar." *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 50.3 (1987): 30-32.

Stewart, Donald C. "The Status of Composition and Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1880-1902: an MLA Perspective." *College English* 47.7 (1985): 734-746.

Targowski, Andrew S. and Joel P. Bowman. "Modeling the Communication Process: The Map is not the Territory." *Journal of Business Communication* 24 (1987): 21-34.

Targowski, Andrew S. and Joel P. Bowman. "The Layer-Based, Pragmatic Model of the Communication Process." *Journal of Business Communication* 25 (1988): 5-24.

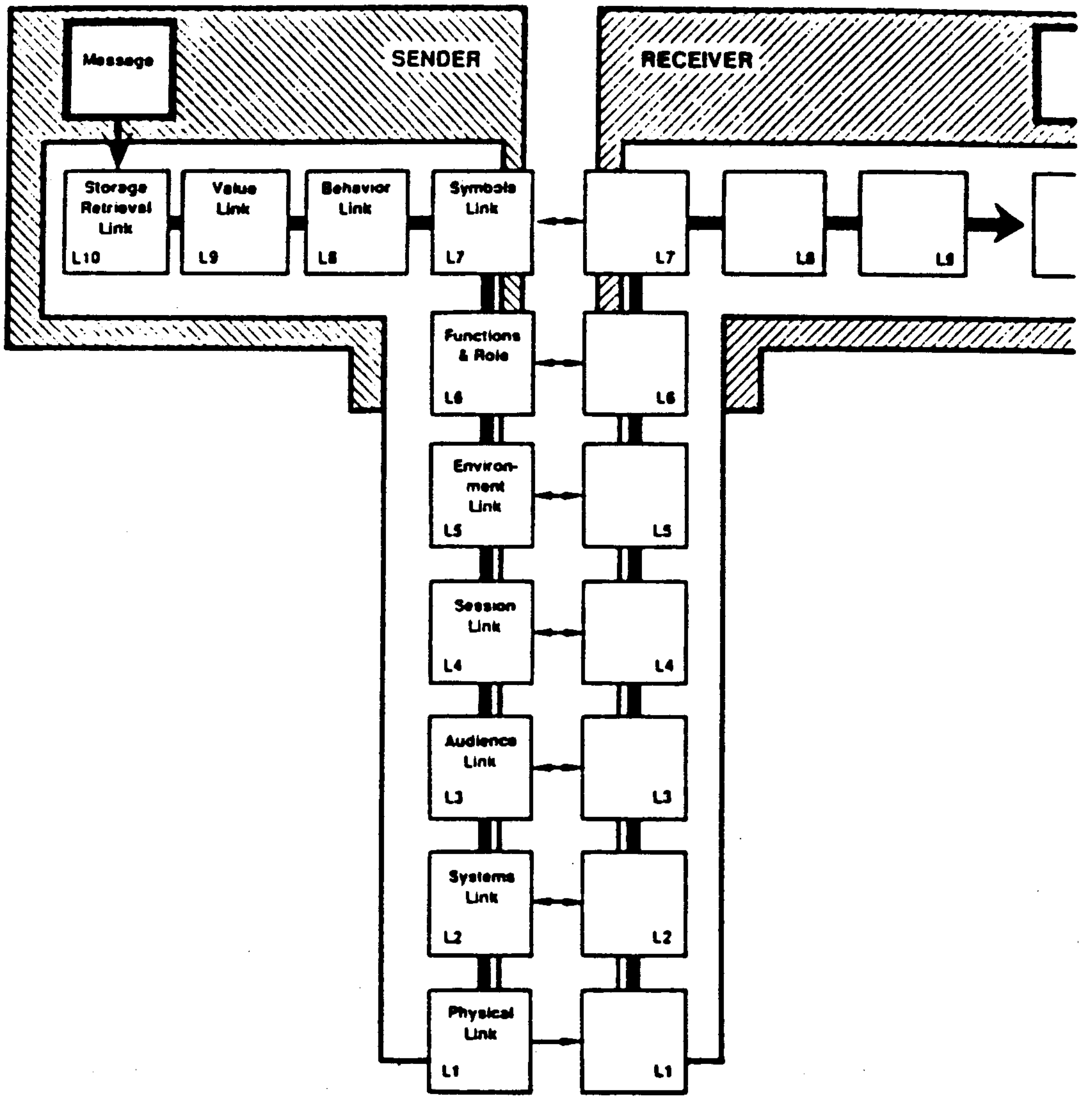
Treece, Malra. *Successful Communication for Business and the Professions.* 5th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1991.

Van Hoorde, Johan. "The Targowski & Bowman Model of Communication: Problems and Proposals for Adaptation. *Journal of Business Communication* 27 (1990): 51-74.

Wolf, Morris Phillip. "The Scholar Who Helps Me Teach Better: S.I. Hayakawa's Scholarship and the Teaching of Business Communication. *Bulletin of the Association for Business Communication* 48.1 (1985): 5-6.

APPENDIX A

Targowski/Bowman Communication Model: Layer-Based Links



The Journal of Business Communication
25:1: Winter 1988
page 7

APPENDIX B

Sample Reference Sheet

Document Form: Business letter

Typical Messages: Wide-ranging. Message can be persuasive, negative, positive or sometimes neutral. Normally letters are used to personalize the communication, but form letters are also used.

Typical Length: minimum--one-half page, maximum--3 pages?

In-House or Out-of-House: Used nearly exclusively for out-of-house communication.

Formatting conventions: Vary. Accepted styles include: blocked, etc., ...(see attached pages) salutations usually include title and last name. Try to avoid Miss, Ms. and Mrs. Salutations are beginning to be eliminated from letters to avoid this problem.

Multiple audiences: If letter is a form letter, obviously multiple audiences exist. If letter is addressed to an individual, keep in mind that the letter may be shown to another person or persons.

Combined with other document forms? Yes. Often explains an enclosure, i.e. serves as a cover letter for other material enclosed with the letter.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Carol David for her encouragement and patience through the preparation of this thesis and my development as a teacher; Dr. Marty Graham for moral support both inside and outside the classroom, and for serving on my committee; Dr. David Edwards for serving on my committee; Dr. Harold Hall for continuing to share his wisdom; and my husband, Kevin, for doing more than this writer could ever put into words.